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thursday, august 31, 2006

Pirates of the Caribbean Ride Update

(And while we're on the subject of Disneyland...)

By now it's probably filtered down to where just about anybody who gives a damn is aware of that the original *Pirates of the Caribbean* ride has been updated to include characters from the Gore Verbinski/Johnny Depp movie franchise. From what I can tell it looks like they've incorporated the new elements in a fairly clever and sequential way...

But! Naturally, being pretty much a purist, I don't think a lot of the whole idea.

However, Johnny Depp is a ...aheh...*Disney Super-Star* now, so like it or not, I can completely understand the desire for Disney to make more continued revenue on his likeness...but I just don't know if it works, or was really even that necessary. However, *any* update will usually have some aspect that is welcome change, and in this case it seems it's a much improved sound system --including the addition of over 2oo speakers to help separate and emphasize all the newly-recorded dialogue. That aspect of the changes is supposed to be quite dramatic. But the scenics?...I just don't know... and hopefully some of these photos officially released by Disney will help illustrate my point.

One of the first new additions you see on the ride is the face of Davy Jones from this summer's biggest hit *Dead Man's Chest* (above) who appears in midair on a mist screen that the boat sails right through as he issues warnings of dire peril awaiting those who dare to venture further.

The Jack Sparrow character is introduced into the animatronic Pirate world via a series of sequential vignettes. This is apparently the first time he is seen on the ride...ducking a couple of pirate guards by hiding amongst

about me

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some dress mannequins.

And here's one of the actual Johnny Depp robots...looking an awful lot like the the man himself and moving in a spooky-real fashion.

And yas, as you can see here, The likeness is close enough to Johnny himself that Disney didn't pass on a chance for him and his animatronic doppleganger being photo-opted together. As the new figures were made from a life-mask of Mr. Depp the resemblence is quite striking (really his overly-white eye-whites are the only thing that gives him away). Upon closer inspection of the imagineers work Johnny --a little taken aback by the realism-- proclaimed "That's just insane."

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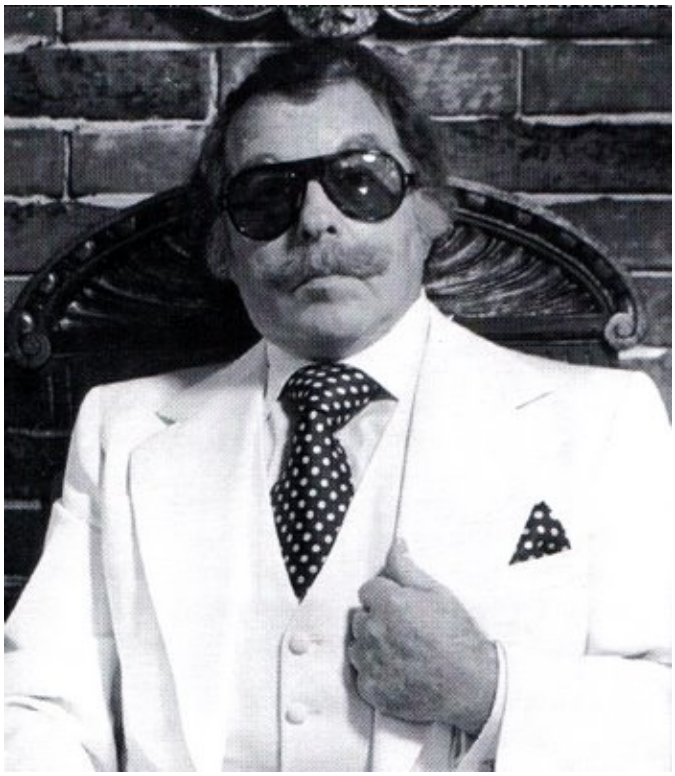
I Power Blogger

Moving along...
If you've ever been on the ride you know that "the big room with the nearly full-size ship and the fort" is one of the mainstay set pieces... But what new and wondrous sight awaits our eyes in this room?

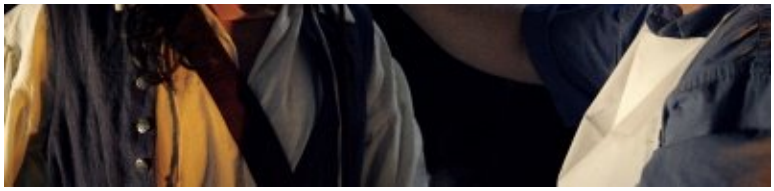
M*ore* robot celebrities! I love Jeffrey Rush's performance as the haunted and ruthless Captain Barbossa...but that doesn't mean I'm particularly excited about seeing his grizzled visage on board the Wicked Wench. Just another staple Disneyland moment gone forever I'm thinking. Which brings me to another point...not only is another iconic animatronic pirate out of *work*, but another familiar voice/over performance gone as well...

So, If anybody's gettin' screwed by this latest somewhat-radical ride retooling it's *gotta* be this guy.



One Mr. Paul Frees (1920-1986). He and Thurl Ravenscroft (your *Ghost Host* from the *Haunted Mansion* ride) originally provided almost every voice you hear in the various Disney park Pirate rides. That's Paul doing his best Robert Newton "Long John Silver" (from 1950's *Treasure Island*) impression that you hear several variations of not only on these rides, but in virtually EVERY animated Pirate-type character presented in the 1960s and '70s.

Changes, changes, changes....



Yes, Robot Johnny looks great. Madame Tussaud would be right proud. But is such wax museum realism out of place in a place bourne out of pure fantasy? Art director Marc Davis never really intended that the players in Disney's ultimate adventure ride look like real people, but more like characters out a storybook...some comical, some cartoonishly sinister. None of 'em really look like movie stars, though.

Now *here's* a damn *man's-man* robot pirate --aka "The world's most famous Auctioneer" -- Pictured here with genius creator, and legendary animator turned Imagineer Marc Davis and his wife, Alice. Marc had worked for the Disney company since 1935. He handled the animation of such classic Disney characters as Snow White, Tinkerbell and Cruella De Vil. When he jumped over to work on the park attractions with the Imagineers he helped breathe life into *The Country Bear Jamboree, The Haunted Mansion, The Jungle Criuse, The Enchanted Tiki Room, Great Moments with Mr. Lincoln* and a long list others. Once he was tapped by Walt for the task of creating a Pirate ride for the park, Marc threw himself into the job , and started to read everything he could on the subject. Some of Marc's early preliminaries for the attraction reflected a lot of the original spirit with which he came into the project.

Rascals and Scoudrels, Villians and Knaves...

...Devils and Black-Sheep...really bad eggs....Drink up me 'Earties, Yo Ho!

But the more he read, the more he discoved how few reported sea battles there were that actually got recorded by the history books. Real pirates generally didn't go out in a blaze of swashbucklin' glory --many were hung ...and even more met their ends as whole ships succumbed to nasty strains of VD that they picked up in the baudier costal towns of the day. Aaaarr, indeed.

While a shipful of syphillus-crazed, nearly-rabid pirates might have been a little dark for the park, (if not the scariest notion this side of Italian Zombies) Marc decided to primarily focus on the more humorous and lighter side of Pirate life, with some adventure and skeletons thrown in for good measure. (Walt never would've gone for the whole VD angle anyway.)

Still, the pirates passion for powdered and perfumed flesh figured enough into their heritage that it couldn't be ignored in a reality revolving around pirate culture. So some "humorous" takes on the advances of pirates on women were the focus of several scenarios of Scaliwaggery.

Most scandalous and politically incorrect being "The Auction" scene where the women of the town are being *sold* as pirate brides. The banner itself reads "Take a wench for a bride."(That's funny not scary, right?)

While the idea and depiction of women being sold into Pirate slavery is still cool with Disney, in 1997 it was deemed that some of the pirates over-amorous advances were deemed too sexist (and downright disrespectful) and had to go. These "bicycle-wheel" chase vignettes were amongst the first things to be altered due to changing and current views on what is and is not socially acceptable. I guess I can understand that, but as much as this gag has been parodied over the years (perhaps most recently on *The Simpsons*) it's still really a shame.

The Pooped Pirate

Here's Marc's original envisionment of the "girl in the barrel" gag.

This character, known as the "Pooped Pirate" --and one can only imagine why-- was one of the more memorable denizens of Disney Pirate town. Sweaty and red-cheeked, he'd swagger and proudly display his ill-gotten booty, a torn slip and high-heeled shoe. As the boat of park guests would float by he would adress them by asking "Now where be that fascinatin' little ol' treasure, aye? 'Eave to mateys! Say, 'ave ya set yer eyes on a bewitchin' maiden in yer travels? ...Oh, she be a lively lassie she were!" referring, of course to his panicked prize in the barrel directly behind him. He continues his ramblings "Oh, I tell ya true, it's sore I be to hoist me colors on the likes of that shy little wench!" As the guest boat drifts by he throws out one final offer to anyone listening "Keep a weather eye open, Mateys! I be willin' to share I be!"
A shade sexist, eh?
Gone.

Here's some shots of ol' P. P. in his prime.

When the axe of socially-conscious change fell in 1997, over-sexed turned to over-indulged as The Pooped One was re-geared for food rather than carnal pleasure to satisfy his cravings. At least he was still around, but longtime fans and Disney enthusiasts noticed and protested the change immediately --though he wouldn't remain this way for even a decade before

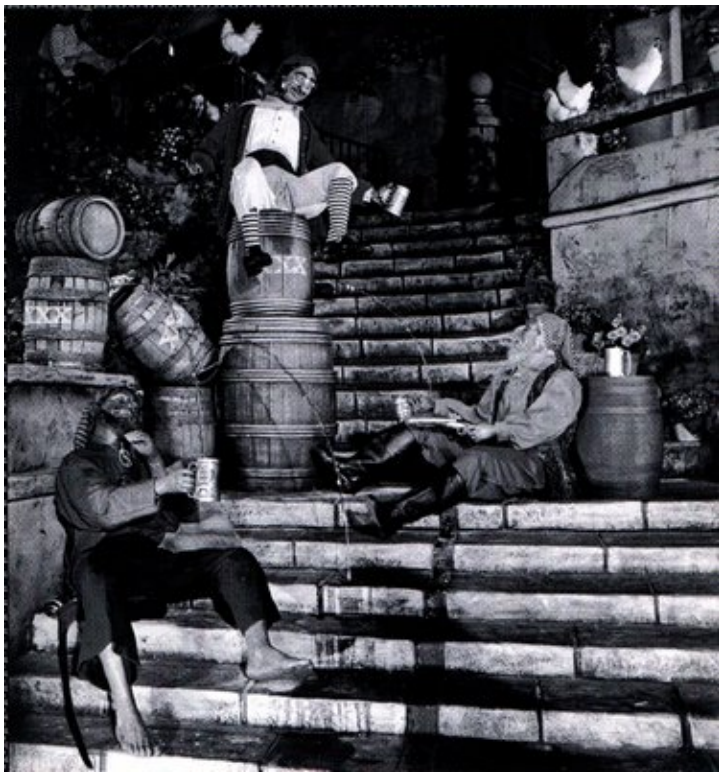
he'd be altered again.

Now, the scene looks like this. The former pooped-glutton is now the "Holder of the Golden Key"...and the dog no longer threatens to give away the nude gal in the barrel, now he provides the the same service for Cap'n Johnny Jack. To me this scene kind of apitimizes the main problem I see with the update.

In the clips that I've seen so far the movements and characterizations on the new Johnny Depp animatronics are way down the road from the robotic capabilities of 1960's automitons. The new figures are

capable of some really quick movements that have a "motion-capture" kind of feel to them. But it's primarily this factor (and the super-close likeness of Depp as *Captain Jack Sparrow* that helps to create --in my opinion -- a technological gap within the dynamic of the presentation, It almost looks like "Hey...who's the real guy up there with the robots?"

This scene with the drunken pirates and the barrels of rum would be updated in (for the better really) 1997 as well. While the concept of the the flowing alcohol from the shot whiskey barrels filling the mugs of the already 'faced Pirates was basically deemed undoable in 1967, thirty years later it would not be so. The gag was one of Marc Davis's original concepts.



The original last thing that the guests would see on the ride was this here rascal, (lovingly known as Thurl) waving goodbye to those who made it through okay. Like so many things in 1997, he too was changed...but not removed. he also became part of the new Cantina scene...even retaining Thurl Ravenscroft's original drunken pirate voice track.

For what it's worth, the original ending was always looked at by some of the original creators as being on the klunky side.
The new ending was changed to be more of a morality play depicting new Pirates (actually figures from the also Marc Davis-designed and recently closed World of Motion attraction) falling under the spell of the treasure and succumbing to yet another pirate vice...greed! The intent was to kind of bring the story full circle, back to the "Dead men tell no Tales" warnings. Of course, the treasure and it's curse is what the whole ride's about anyway... and here at the end of the ride you see the cycle repeating itself. As an in-joke, amongst of the things that the greedy dogs are trying to make off with is a large painting featuring the image of actor Peter Ustivnov as Blackbeard from the 1967 Disney feature Blackbeard's Ghost. Sure, why not. It's a moot point now because this scene too has been scuttled in favor of a Jack Sparrow related ending.

Robot Johnny must get ahold of that key somewhere along the the line because the end of the ride finds him in his own room of treasure, surrounded by riches. Note the curved archway and stairstep levels shows just how it replaced the last scene with the theives and the painting.

Well, that's just ...swell.
The Disneyland Pirates of the Caribbean ride was the last original park project that Walt himself oversaw before his death in 1967. A real tragedy is that he never got a chance to see the ride open. Ironically the "auction scene" was the only one that he ever got to see in motion. (Which might explain why *it* hasn't been altered since the ride opened.)
The Pirates attraction at Disneyland was intended to be the new high standard in ride experience sophistication...A showcase for the talents of the Imagineers. Never again would a theme park ride have such a slow building of mood and intrigue. The waterway twists and curves following a trail of skewered skeletons and it really seems like a long time before you see a "living pirate" on the Disneyland ride in Anaheim. Actually, it is. The California ride clocks in at a whopping fifteen minutes --The Florida ride at Disney World is literally half that at seven and a half. If it was just the Disney World ride getting the treatment (which I assume it will...) I wouldn't care as much. But Anaheim's was the original and now it's been forever changed.
The Disney money machine's gears grind -- black smoke belches from it's stacks and more unbelievable Americana goes on the scrap-heap.

When Marc and Alice Davis were interviewed by Rick West in the late 1990's Marc had these poiniant words: "Walt Disney himself [said] that his films should be re-released every seven years because there would be a new generation that saw them, and they were 17 years old or so; now they would be in their 20's and have children and they would want them to see the same thing that they saw. I think this is terribly important, that these things are lasting, and are something that is very important to the people who've enjoyed them. I don't think they like going down and seeing something that's been changed simply to be changed. To say "Well, we're updating this," I think the thing is like history; you don't make history different than it was, in order to say, make it better. You can't change

history; it's there. What's good with these attractions should always be there for everybody to see."
"If it ain't broke, don't fix it." Alice added.

Well, it wasn't broke but it sure as hell seems all fixed now.
But who am I to gripe, change is after all a constant factor at Disneyland, and they're ingeniously feeding off the current pirate craze that they helped create and perpetuate by hawking crazy-real Johnny Depp robots as a new draw to a ride that's an old favorite. (also providing pining housewives their best chance to see a huge hearthrob movie star "in person")
They'll probably make a billion dollars.
My thanks to Rick West (of Theme Park Adventure magazine), Tony Baxter, *Dead Men Tell No Tales.com* and Jack and Leon Janzen for providing the invaluable information used in the creation of this long-overdue post.

posted by c. martin croker at 11:27 pm | 8 comments

monday, august 14, 2006

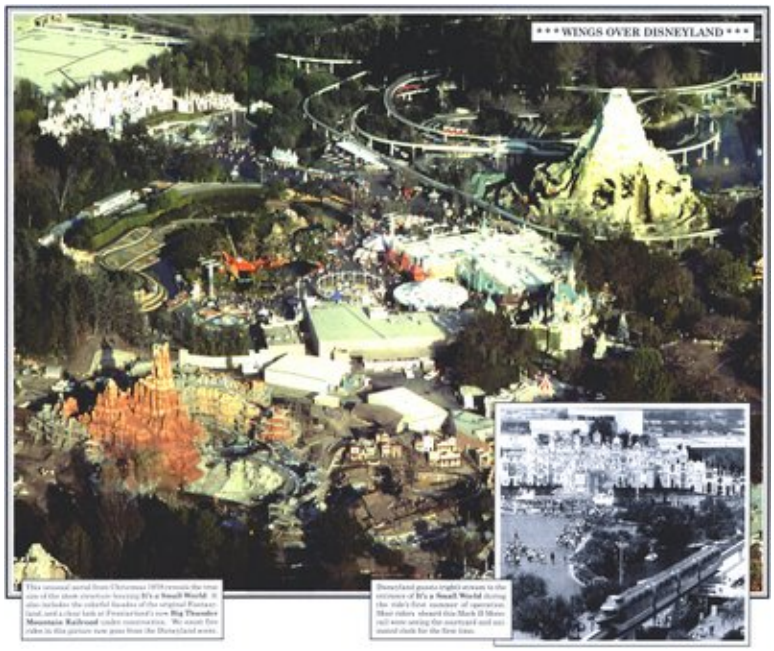
Aerial Disneyland

The superb Disneypark fan mag *The E-Ticket* periodically runs a neat feature called *Wings over Disneyland* that shows the park from not only high in the air but from different angles and periods of time as well. Here's three incredible shots that demonstrate this feature eloquently. As always you can double click on these images to make them larger, or you can download them as a psd and make 'em huge... providing a facinating overview of the world's greatest theme park as it has changed over the years.

This first shot looks down on almost the entirety of the Alweg Monorail track in Fantasyland circa 1959.

View #2 shows almost all of the park in this spectacular view from 1964.

The third and final view from Christmas-time in 1978, shows the park undergoing big changes including the construction of the recently-troubled Thunder Mountain rollercoaster ride.



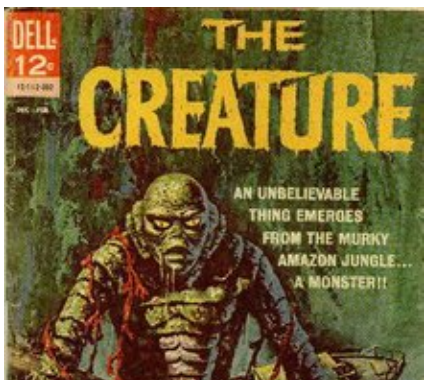
Kudos to Leon and Jack Janzen for their years editing this always insightful and often mind-blowing magazine. My continued thanks and respect, and keep up the good work!
More cool stuff comin'...

">Link

posted by c. martin croker at 2:46 am | 2 comments

tuesday, august 08, 2006

Ersatz Creatures (Black Lagoon Variety)



Some folks have all the luck. Some folks don't. Our old childhood pal *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* tends to wind up on both sides of this fence, depending on your point of view. Over the years he's been represented rather maginificently, kinda quirky and super-ludicrously.... But like the early green haired Fred and

Barney figures, things can get so far-off model as to be reinvented in unexpected and deliriously cool ways. If you've been paying attention to previous posts you know where this is going... and what side of the fence we'll be favoring in this forum.

So here's a killer collection of off-kilter Creature curiousities... Starting off with the cover of *Dell Comics* short-lived *The Creature* comic book of the early 1960's. (There's something very 1st season *Scooby Doo* about this design...)

The Offbeat

Here's a rather large vintage plaster *Swamp-Thingy* Creature cousin menacing a plaster fisherman at a goofy golf course in Toronto.

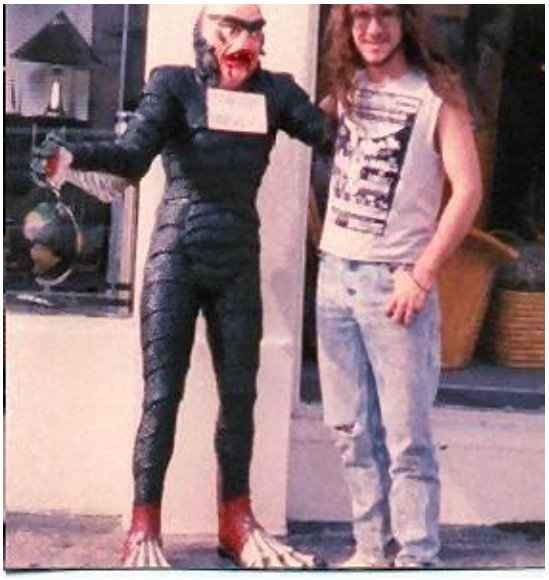
A guy in Florida carved this great Creature-Tiki and sold it on eBay (...and

we bought it!)

I guess there's Mexican knockoffs of just about everything. (I've seen several ceramic knockoffs of plastic Peanuts and Popeye figurals in my own collection) and the Creature is no exception. Some Mexican outfit started producing this 5 foot tall hard-plaster statue around the time *Revenge of the Creature* came out (in 1955) for tourist themed stores all over that country.

Rob Zombie owns his own version of this statue (which sort of looks like it's starting to turn human) that was featured --along with the rest of his amazing house-- on a episode of *Cribs*. Rob said saw the statue standing out front of a Sombrero shop and he basically just had to have 'im! (--yet *another* perk to being Rob Zombie.

Look! There's another one on Melrose Ave. out front of *Harvey's* in



1987. (I think the guy pictured with this one here *also* owns it now.)

Here's another full-size Creature, from someone's collection. I believe sold through the Rubies costume catalog.

Cwazy Collectibles

Here's the unlikely Holy Grail of Creature Collectables...The *Penn-Plax* Action-Aerating Aquarium Creature. I remember picking this up in the pet department in *Woolworth's* at Cobb Center, and then putting it back, put off that it was *"only a scaled-down version of that Aurora model that I've got "* --that and the 4.29 price tag. I think I also thought *"Pfft--costs more than the damn model, too! "* Dopey me! Guess reasons like that's are why it's so rare.

Yup, while the Gillman wasn't everywhere in the *'60's*, he *did* get around for a fish-man.

Here's some other marketing oddities

The *Creature Mystery* Board game (featuring the *Aurora* Creature image again.)

...and the original Creature *Soaky*!

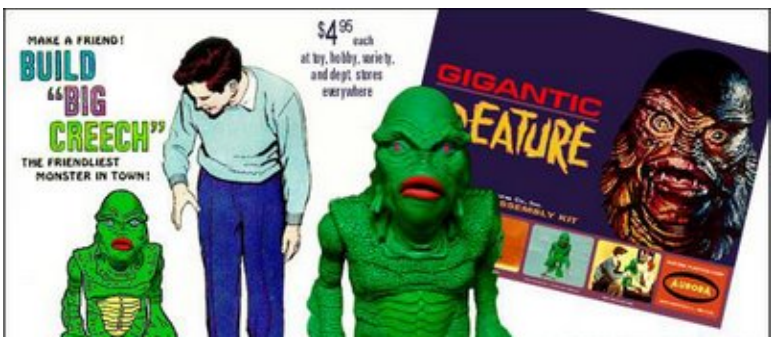
Emenee released a *Formex 7 casting set* that included several *Universal Monsters* including guess who?

Super 8 digest films were available (this one features an Ang Lee *Hulk*-sized Creature)...or if you lacked a projector, you could order the *HorrorScope* Nickleodeon-type *Movie viewer* from the back of *Famous Monsters* Magazine. (the one pictured here sold recently on eBay for over 1300$!)

This *Coca-Cola* can isn't that old, but what's with the "Charles Burns-style" spiral accent. Is he supposed to be disoriented? Perplexed? Drunk?

Another for the shoulda-woulda-*should've* file... Here's the one Monster Hot-Rod Aurora really shoulda released *The Creature's Crate*...at least now it's available as a resin kit (if you reeeeeally look for it, that is).

More wish fufillment. In answer to *Aurora's Gigantic Frankenstein* kit Comes another fan produced shoulda-been kit, The *"Aurora" Gigantic Creature*! I forget the actual cost of this bad boy but I think he was about *25 times* the 1960's gag price in the ad.



A fan-boy favorite for sure, this out-o-print "*Laguna*" kit from the 1990's was a big one too. (I think this is the one that used to be on display at *Creature Features* in Burbank) I didn't measure her but I would guess she was about 20-24 inches tall.
Oh yeah,..nice rack, monster-face.

Here's an interesting kit (from the collection of Johnny Gillbert I believe) It's one of Ben Chapman starting to take the costume off, complete with separate and interchangeable heads Here's a good shot of Ben Chapman (who played the Creature while on land in the original 1954 film) actually signing the kit --while it sports no cabeza at all!

Ah, while he's at it...here's Ben signing my own Creature mask (not land, though) at *Creaturefest 2003* in *Wakulla springs* Florida. (One of my favorite Cons *ever*!)
Ben *did* say (completely unsolicited) that the shade of green I 'd painted it was just about *dead-on* ...*whew*... (those pictures I'd taken out at Bob Burns' house of *his* Creature masks made great reference!)

CREATURE FROM THE BLACK LAGOON
CREATURE FROM THE BLACK LAGOON
CREATURE FROM THE BLACK LAGOON
CREATURE FROM THE BLACK LAGOON

NO FRIGGIN' TEETH!

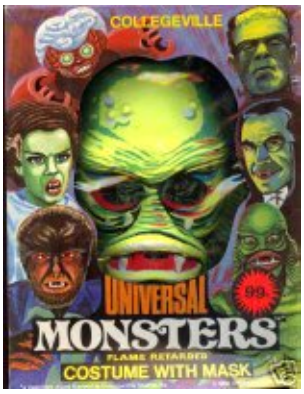
One little misinterpetation from a black and white photograph and all of a sudden Blackie L. spends

most of the 1960's with a mouth full of sharp teeth. I guess the marketeers back then must've thought he looked a shade more formidable with a face-full o' fangs.

You can see from these photos that more often than not what is interpeted as fangs is actually Ben Chapman's cheeks on either side of his open mouth--that's his tongue, too(...You can even see his teeth in the amazing photo on the right). This simple misconception affected a whole generation of kiddie halloween masks and costumes.

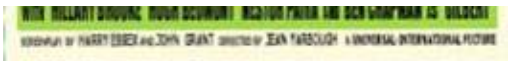
Monster
costume and
mask
Ben Cooper Creature Costume
in box and alternate mask - 1973

Monster
CREATURE
CREATURE



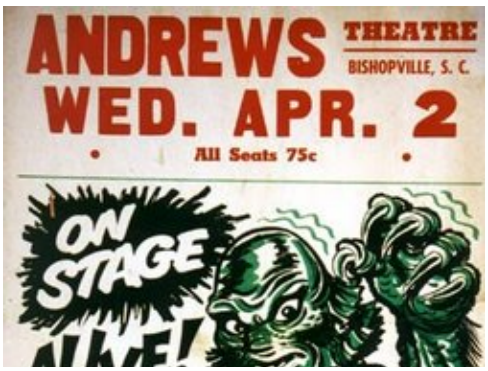
Imaginary Creature Tales

Another speculation film entry *Abbott and Costello Meet the Creature from the Black Lagoon* Too bad they really didn't. About as close as they came was this 10 second "creature-behind-me" punchline (below) at the end of a sketch on live TV shortly after the first movie came out in 1954. One more movie in the late 50's woulda been a great shot in the ass for the careers of all three.



In 2002 *Starlog magazine* ran a cool comic of yet another fantasy *Black Lagoon* team-up of sorts...

Live Appearances

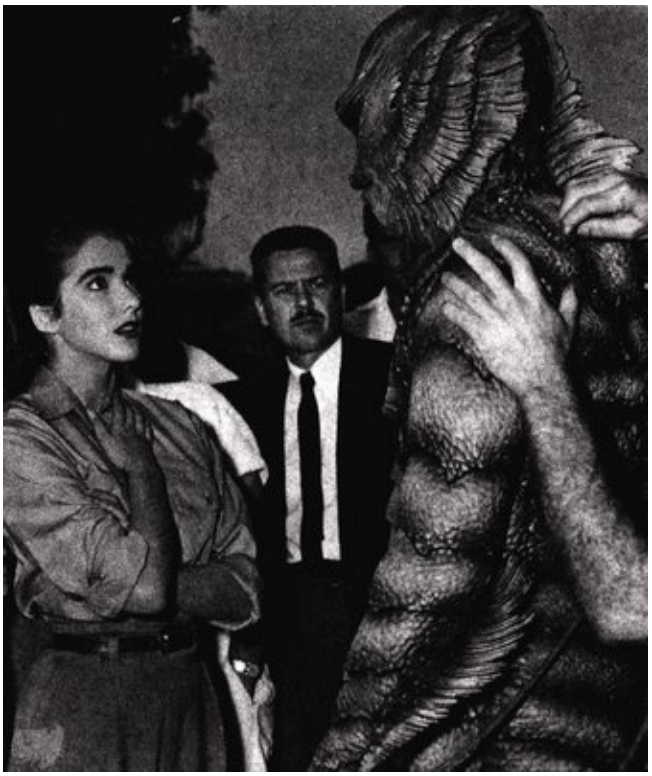


Man, who'd they hire for the live gig in the Creature suit, Martin Scorsese? Alan Ladd? Billy Barty? Looks like he *at least* needs a bigger box to stand on! Also (above left) The Creature costume made the late-night *Spook-Show* rounds with some other dog-eared *Hollywood Monsters* in the *Ballyhoo* era of the late '50's.

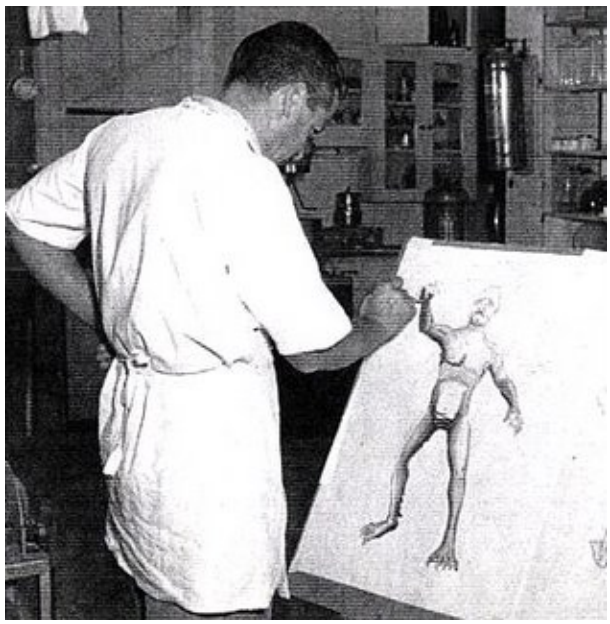
Didn't they totally riff on this scene in *Matinee'*? If Cathy Moriarity was playin' the nurse *here* I'da probably faked a seizure.

IF YOU FEEL FAINT WHEN YOU SEE THE CREATURE OUR NURSE WILL RESTORE YOUR STRENGTH SO THAT YOU MAY SEE THE REST OF THE FEATURE.....
Sound Management

Clawin' Cousins



Hey, see this guy here inbetween Julie and Ben? That's Jack Kevan. He was the main-man on the team that brought you one of the most perfectly designed and timeless monsters in all of film history. He must've wound up with some green-eyed rubber suit envy, because he not only *designed* the suit for the *Monster of Piedras Blancas*, (1959) but he *played* the critter as well. --In fact, the drawing he's working on here looks like a cross between the two costumes. Here he is on location playing the old "jump and I'll catch you" game with Jeanne Carmen.



The publicity shots of the Monster with the ripped-off rubber head were surprisingly gory for the day (and always sorta creeped me out as a kid), but established the notion early on that this lighthouse lurker played a bit rougher than most of his A-list counterparts.

Booga-Booga! Can't leave the *She-Creature* off this list. Here "She" (Paul Blaisdell) menaces wife Jackie Blaisdell and Kathy Burns (holding the broom) at the Blaisdell Topanga Canyon home in this wild color gag photo from 1956.

Wow, one of these days I have *got* to MFin' see *Chabela y Pepito Contra los Monstruos!*
We've almost come full circle as Mexican *(Universal-style) Frankenstein* battles the South-of-the-border Gillman. (Something else cool that you can only see in Mexico.)
The lobby card border almost looks like an ad for Don Post Studios (except for fang-face, natch).

What can top that? Not me... I'm outta here.

My thanks for the insights and pictures to Kirk Demarais, Johnny "Gillman" Gillbert, Bob Burns, and Ben Chapman Without their input this post would've been a lot less entertaining.

posted by c. martin croker at 12:57 pm | 9 comments